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SUBJECT: Ambassador Moriarty Calls for Elections by End of Year

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ambassador Moriarty focused on the three "D's" of democracy, development and the denial of space to terrorists as the pillars of U.S.-Bangladesh relations during his first press conference in Bangladesh. Most of the questions centered on the issue of democracy. The Ambassador called on the government to conduct free, fair and transparent elections by the end of the year and to lift the current state of emergency to make this happen. The Ambassador's comments were the main headline in the majority of local newspapers and television news programs. Initial reactions to his comments from the media and political party leaders have been positive. A senior GOB official expressed some chagrin that the Ambassador should be so definite in his first press conference. While the Ambassador's comments reflected USG policy that has been articulated at the highest levels in the past, there is no question that his statement on the day of presenting his credentials was a powerful message. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On April 21, Ambassador Moriarty presented his credentials to President Iajuddin Ahmed. That afternoon the Ambassador held his first press conference. More than 75 journalists and photographers from almost 50 different news agencies attended the press conference. While the reporters were predominately affiliated with Bangladesh media outlets, AFP, AP, Reuters, VOA, and the Dubai-based Geo News sent their Dhaka correspondents.

¶3. (U) In his remarks the Ambassador emphasized the three "D's," which are the pillars of U.S. relations with Bangladesh. The "D's" include: democracy, development and denial of space to terrorists. His remarks can be found on our website at:
<http://dhaka.usembassy.gov>.

Questions Mainly on Political Issues

¶4. (U) The reporters' questions focused on the political situation in Bangladesh. They were keen to learn about U.S. views on the current Caretaker Government, as well as our views on the prospects for elections by the end of this year as outlined in the election roadmap. The Ambassador was also asked about the role of the Bangladesh Army in the political process. Other reporters wanted to know about the U.S. position on anti-corruption efforts and whether former Prime Ministers Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina should be released.

¶5. (U) In his comments, the Ambassador used the three "D's" to focus his message. He stated the U.S. expects to see elections before the end of this year according to the election roadmap. He also emphasized that holding credible elections under a state of emergency would be difficult and called on the government to lift the state of emergency. He stated the Army should not take on more political responsibilities or assume power. With respect to the two former Prime Ministers, he said that as with all defendants, the government should conduct fair and transparent trials that provide

adequate due process to the defendants. If found guilty by a court of law the accused should be held accountable, but if the charges were not proven in court they should be released, he emphasized.

Food Focus

16. (U) In addition to questions about political developments, reporters also asked the Ambassador about U.S. policies to reduce food crises both in Bangladesh and around the world. The Ambassador stated that the United States was watching the situation closely. He added the U.S. was a major food aid provider in Bangladesh and that a shipment of almost 50,000 metric tons of wheat would arrive in Chittagong in May.

Positive Reactions from the Media

17. (U) The press conference was featured as the top story in the majority of local newspapers and many television news broadcasts. While covering many of the issues raised in the press conference, reporting generally focused on the Ambassador's comments that lifting of the state of emergency is a prerequisite for free, fair and transparent elections, and that the Army role should not expand into the political arena. Many newspapers incorporated verbatim portions of his opening remarks and at least one paper printed these remarks in their entirety its op-ed section.

Reactions

18. (SBU) Following the press conference, key Embassy contacts told us they were pleased with the Ambassador's comments. A prominent editor said the Ambassador's message would resonate with the people of Bangladesh. Leaders from both the Awami League and BNP noted

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that his comments were "timely," "clear cut" and "statesman-like." A senior GOB official commented privately that the Ambassador's remarks "raised a storm" in the government, but that it was "okay".

Comment

19. (SBU) While the GOB official would not elaborate on his comment, there is no question that the Ambassador's message packed a powerful punch in the eyes of most Bangladeshis. We have called repeatedly for free, fair and transparent elections and for a lifting of the state of emergency. For the Ambassador to make these unambiguous statements on the day he presented his credentials, however, increased their significance in the eyes of many.

110. (SBU) The Ambassador's public messages will continue to focus on the three "D's." We have already seen some media outlets refer to the "D's" specifically in their reporting, and we expect to see this in the press even more as the Ambassador begins his calls on political leaders and other influential members of Bangladesh society. We will capitalize on the Ambassador's current honeymoon period through an aggressive press strategy to prominently highlight the U.S. positions on important issues facing Bangladesh.

MORIARTY